

[Sam Hemingway, Free Press](#)

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., said Tuesday he will head to Afghanistan later this week to meet with military and government officials there and to visit with some of the 1,500 Vermont National Guard soldiers deployed in the country.

Welch said the trip, his third to Afghanistan, also will include stops in Pakistan, Lebanon and possibly other countries. Welch will travel to the region as part of a six-member congressional delegation.

Welch, who has been a critic of the current military surge in Afghanistan, said he wants to visit with the Vermont soldiers to thank them for their service, hear how their mission is going and tell them that they can count on the support of the state and nation after they return home later this year.

"The one place in Afghanistan that we'll be that I specifically asked for is Bagram," Welch said, referring to the massive air base north of Kabul. "It's a very powerful experience meeting the soldiers in the environment where they are working."

Of the 1,500 Vermont Guard soldiers deployed in Afghanistan, about 1,000 are based at Bagram.

Welch said he hopes the trip will provide a progress report on anticorruption programs being undertaken by President Hamid Karzai and the Afghan government. Welch said he is concerned about reports that Karzai recently fired an official who had refused to back off efforts to root out corruption.

Welch said he plans to speak to Afghan government officials about his concerns. He said he did not know whether his delegation would meet with Karzai, as he did during his trips to Afghanistan in 2007 and 2009.

"We all feel in America that if American soldiers and taxpayers are going to be putting so much effort and time and sacrifice into this that we have an expectation that the Karzai government at the bare minimum is going to root out corruption," the congressman said.

Welch has said that although he supports the troops, he has questions about whether the United States should be engaged in nation-building, or helping shore up the country's infrastructure, in order to defeat the "dispersed, decentralized threat" that he said the insurgent Taliban forces pose.

Welch said he was scheduled to leave late Tuesday night but had been instructed not to divulge the delegation's exact itinerary for security reasons. He said the trip will last about a week.